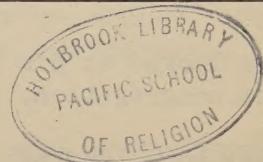


to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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HOME VALLEY*

By William G. Mather and Irene L. Gochnour

Pastor Jim opened the car door for his wife. "I guess this is it, Edna, but it doesn't come up to the description, does it?"

Edna looked critically at the little country church. "It used to be pretty, though, I can tell. And maybe the people are nice -- after all, they're what you are most concerned with, you know."

"People reveal a lot about themselves in the way they keep the Lord's house. I think there is work to be done here." He closed the car door and turned toward the church.

Edna slipped her hand through his arm, "And I married the man who can do it, Jim."

The few people in the church were nicely dressed. Many of them old members of long years standing. Large blocks of empty pews were obvious. The paint was black above the radiators, the carpet was badly worn in the aisles. Edna decided to ignore the condition of the church, at least for the present.

Jim was saying, "I find my text this morning, my first in this pulpit and with you, in the Book of Beginnings, Genesis: 'And the Lord God planted a garden eastward.'"

After shaking hands and exchanging greetings with the new parishioners, Jim and Edna followed Mr. Homestead to his farm where they had been invited to dinner. Mr. Homestead was an oldish man, leader in the church, and had farmed most of his life right here in Home Valley.

He opened the door of his home, smiling, "Here we are, folks. Mother!" he called. "Come meet the new minister's wife -- and her husband."

We are glad to present this story of HOME VALLEY because of its relevance to the growing interest in the family type farm and the land and homes movement among rural churches today.

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Hurried steps coming from the kitchen and the fragrance of food announced the approach of an accomplished cook. "How do you do. Now dinner is all ready. All I have to do is lift the things."

Jim took advantage of the opportunity during dinner to get some information about the church and the people to whom he would minister. Mr. Homestead knew most of the answers. "Well, you asked me a question and I'll tell you. Reverend, in the old days we had preachers that could fill that church."

Jim looked at him steadily without blinking. "Reckon they had a little help from the congregation, too, maybe."

They both laughed. They understood each other.

Homestead shook his head in emphasis, "I'm going to like you! You and I'll get along." He was serious now. "This is the straight of it. This whole neighborhood has changed. All up and down the valley, we used to own our own land. Family after family, we lived here on our own land, generation after generation. It was our neighborhood, and we lived in it for keeps. We built homes and schools and churches, and we took pride in them. We filled them with people, too -- homes and schools and churches. Good people. I tell you, there were none better!"

They were good days, Jim could tell by the way the farmer's face glowed. Then the glow was gone.

"Something happened. A change came -- a lot of changes, and it's hard to say which was cause and which was result. Machinery did part of it. The scythe was replaced by the cradle and the cradle by the mower and the mower by the drop reaper and the drop reaper by the binder and the binder by the combine. Each one let a man do more than he had done before. We didn't need so many men to farm, so our extra children began going to the city, just like our extra hogs and potatoes. The cities grew as more and more people went to live in them. But the people went to them from the land. Yet, even while the whole nation was growing, and farmers getting fewer, the people left on the land could still raise more than the nation could buy."

Jim nodded, "So one answer is that there just aren't so many folks here in the valley as there once were."

"But there's more to it than that," Homestead said promptly. "The folks that's left are different, somehow. It takes a lot of money to buy this new machinery; it takes more land to use it on, and land is higher than it used to be anyhow. All in all, it's harder to get started with a farm without much money now. So, the city folks with money to invest, or some farmer with a bit ahead, will buy a farm and put a tenant on it or hire day labor to do the work. Some of 'em are good folks, too, but they don't know how long they'll live in a place and don't take the interest in the schools and churches the way the owners used to do."

"So that's another answer." Jim was impressed.

"Have some more chicken, pastor." Mrs. Homestead held the platter toward him.

Jim was thinking. How long would farming be a family affair? The way Homestead put it, it was well on its way to becoming big, impersonal business,

mass production of crops by hired labor who understood nothing of the family cooperation it had required in the old days to provide for the needs of the people whose home and living were the farm.

"Have some more chicken, pastor," Homestead interrupted.

Jim started, picked up his cup smiling, "Thanks, don't care if I do."

Edna took the cup from him and put it back on the saucer. "He asked if you would have more chicken, dear." To the others, "He was thinking. I know the symptoms. Don't mind him."

"Does he do it often?" Homestead inquired in mock earnestness. "He's apt to starve to death if he thinks that way very much."

Jim came to his own defense. "Well, you gave me a lot to think about, Mr. Homestead. I bet you did it on purpose to keep me from eating. Just for that, I will have some more chicken -- and another baked apple, too," he said, passing his plate.

* * *

Pastor Jim remembered that pleasant day when, two years later, he and Homestead stopped at the cemetery to trim a new-made grave. After the death of his wife, Homestead's interest in his farm had declined. He talked with the pastor about it.

"I'll have to give up the farm, I guess. There's just too much for me, doin' the housework and all the chores as well as the field work . . I never did tell you, did I, that we had bought a little house on Elm Street where we meant to retire when we got too old to work and were turned out to grass? Well, I can live there, even though we hadn't quite planned it this particular way."

"Have you listed the farm for sale yet?" Jim asked.

"No," Homestead replied, "I'm going to see Perkins about it in the morning."

Jim was disturbed. "Look. Remember when I came here, two years ago, the first day we were talking about how farmland had been changing hands here, but not for the good? Well, I've got a sort of scheme. I've been thinking about it a lot. Come over to the house tonight, won't you? And get Sam and Bill Slocum from out your way, and I'll ask some of the others."

That night five men came to the parsonage. They were mostly past middle age, farmers of many years on their own land in the valley.

Bill Slocum, whose land lay next to Homestead's, had a definite interest in what happened when Homestead quit farming. Bill pointed out, "Why, I can name five farms out my road right now that used to belong to our people, but now two are owned out of the community and two ain't anything and one's something but he sure don't work at it very hard. What can we do about it?"

Jim had been waiting for them to ask; he thought he had an answer. "Well, I think maybe we aren't as helpless as we might be. I think God's just waiting to help us a lot if we'll give Him a chance. Homestead's got to sell his

farm. There's nothing we can do about that. But we can do something about how he sells it. There are six of us here in this room. We all know he's going to sell. But we're the only ones. Why don't we find a buyer for him? Find a buyer that's of our own people, or at least that is the kind of man we want to have in this neighborhood, instead of leaving it all to luck?"

Sam Hardy liked the idea. "Could be. Yes, sir, could be done. Let's make a committee out of ourselves and put an ad in one or two papers."

"Why not in one of the church papers, where it'd be seen by the kind of people we want?" George added.

Sam was enthusiastic. "Sure. That would be logical."

George was cautious. "Better not say just what farm it is. Describe it, tell what kind of community it's in, say what kind of family we want to sell it to, but not sign any name. A blind ad, they call 'em. Just sign it, 'Address -- the Land Committee, Home Valley Church, Home Valley.'"

Jim was pleased that his plan had been accepted.

A few weeks later he read this announcement during church: "On Thursday the Goodmans, who have bought the Homestead place, are expecting to arrive. Wednesday afternoon the Martha Circle is going to tidy up the house a bit; the ladies will meet there at two o'clock with aprons and pails. The John Slocums will entertain the Goodmans for supper Thursday night. Mr. Homestead will telephone several of us if there are not enough men with the truck to unload -- if you want to be on the list speak to him. Saturday night at eight we'll have a housewarming, a regular pound party -- and don't check the weight too carefully."

Pastor Jim's living room became the scene of frequent Land Committee meetings. At one of these he made a special request.

"Emily and her young man stopped by my place the other evening to see if I'd marry them. He's been working in town for some time, but says that he would like to farm when he and Emily settle down. He's young, got only a few hundred dollars saved up and can't swing a deal for a farm alone. I promised that I'd try to help them. The young fellow's had a good deal of farming experience."

Sam grinned, "This one's easy, Pastor Jim. I happen to know that the bank is looking for a new tenant for the old Kent farm. You know, the heirs won't sell, want to hang on to possession for sentimental reasons. The present tenant isn't very satisfactory. They gave notice last fall."

Fred was dubious. "But this fellow and Emily don't have any machinery, and not much stock."

"It's good stock, though," Bill Slocum said in defense. "I know his father's herd."

Homestead suggested, "I've got a little money I could lend."

George was carried along, "I could spare a few hundred myself."

"Low interest, though," said Pastor Jim, "and long term. They're just

tarting out. We don't want to make the burden too heavy."

"That's right," said Homestead. "I'm willing. Why not make a pool of the money and let the committee manage it as a committee?"

Everyone seemed to have a suggestion to make.

"Let's create a fund of money for just this sort of thing. With this group to administer it, it would be as sound as a rock. I'll take a low rate just for the security of the thing."

"Say, why not a Church Credit Union, or something like that, for just this purpose of helping young couples to get a foothold on the land, or to keep one there?"

"With good selection of the people it is loaned to and checking up on them now and then in a good sort of way, it ought to work."

"It couldn't miss," said Jim. "Now, somebody ought to speak to the bank about this couple so they'll get a chance at the farm. And who will start collecting the money together?"

"Frank West of the bank lives just a short piece from me. I can see him tonight on the way home," Sam volunteered, "and get him to promise to consider Emily and her husband first on the list."

Fred had another idea. "Say, there's another thing. If these young folks do get the Kent place, they ought to get a long-term lease. With the ordinary one year lease, they won't feel very sure of being here a long time. They ought to have security of possession so that they can make improvements on the property and build up the land -- that place has been running down for years."

George agreed. "It would give us -- I mean this land settlement fund -- more security for the loan. We would be more sure they would have time to pay it back."

"I'd like to have them feel that they could go ahead and start a family, too," said Jim, "without fear that they might have to drag the children around the country from farm to farm and school to school."

Homestead nodded. "Sounds reasonable to me. I think that maybe, with all of us sort of standing sponsor for their character and farming practice, the bank could be persuaded to make a long lease. It would be to everyone's advantage all the way around."

* * *

Sam Hardy had all his children home about the middle of the summer for a reunion. It looked like a community picnic; he had four sons and one daughter, three of them married; there were seven grandchildren, and Paul had brought his fiancee, Doris.

When they had eaten and the children had gone to play, Sam rapped on the table. "While I've got you all here today, I want to talk something over with you. I want to talk over what's going to happen when I get a little older."

His children, embarrassed by the thought of talking about their father's death, protested and reassured him that it was a long time yet and that they would take care of him.

But Sam would not be put off. "I'm not fooling. And I don't want any smart talk. This is still my home and you boys -- and you, Mary -- better mind or we'll have a little kitchen session. That razor strap still hangs alongside the clock. But let's not kind about it; I'm not getting any younger. Some day, ten to fifteen years from now, you'll gather here and we'll go for a little drive together over to the churchyard."

Sam's wife laid her hand on his arm; it seemed so unnecessary to make these decisions now.

Sam continued, "I want to talk over what will become of this farm."

"We won't have any trouble over that," Mary reassured him. "We aren't a quarreling family."

"No, thank God. You've been pretty good children. But there's something that shouldn't hang fire until the time comes for the settlement of my estate. Sam, do you need any money?"

Sam, Jr., was startled. "Why no, Dad. We're doing all right. Why do you ask?"

Sam ignored his question, turning to Will, "How's it with you?"

Will laughed, politely enough, "You know I could buy you out right now. What ?"

"Mary?"

She glanced at her husband, "Dan has a good job, Dad. And he gets another raise next year."

Sam was satisfied with the answers. "And John will finish medical school in two more years. He may need a little nest egg then, but I guess the rest of you could provide it if I'm not around."

Will was inquisitive. "You skipped Paul."

"It's Paul I want to talk about."

Paul was embarrassed, "Should I go?"

Sam put his hand on Paul's shoulder. "You sit right here. Now, Paul hasn't said much to me, but I know how he feels. He's the only one of you that wants the farm, and I want him to have it."

Sam, Jr., shrugged, "He can have it for all of me."

"But how?" asked Sam. "That's what I want to talk about. With prices as they are, if Mother and I should die right now this farm would bring \$20,000 on the open market. That would be \$4000 apiece for each of you. And who would pay it?"

aul, here, he'd go in debt \$16,000 to buy his old home place."

"He wouldn't be buying it exactly," argued Will.

"Same thing," Sam insisted. "Twenty thousand dollars, less his share, is 16,000. He'd be buying the rest of you out of your shares."

"But the farm isn't really worth \$20,000," John pointed out. "Prices are all out of line now."

"But I might die now."

"I get it."

"And Paul needs a farm. He's a good farmer. And he needs to get married, too. Why at his age I had two of you and another one coming. A young couple ought to marry before they're too old to raise a family."

Paul looked at Doris apologetically, "Maybe Doris and I had both better while you talk this over."

Sam turned toward them. "I'm sorry if I offended you, Doris. I'm a plain-spoken man and this family you're getting into doesn't beat around the bush."

"That's one thing I like about it," she assured him.

Sam continued with his proposal. "Paul ought to have some assurance, and soon, that the farm will be his and with it all the improvements he makes on it, both in the house and the land. As it is, he can't be sure. And not being sure, he hesitates to do much in the way of long-range planning. He is really more like a hired man than a son and heir."

Paul had reached the point of protestation. "Now, Dad, I never said anything."

"I know, my boy," Sam said knowingly, "but I've noticed. And Pastor Jim was talking to me the other day about it. I think he's right. You ought to have a legally sound basis in the land for marriage and a home and children."

"Deed the place to him," Sam, Jr., suggested.

"I want him protected better than that. Things are all right between you boys and Mary now, but things can happen."

"Our law firm can do that, Dad," Will said. "It is a little unusual, but believe that if we all made up an agreement, and properly signed it, giving up our shares to Paul, or placing a reasonable value on our shares that he could carry without difficulty, it would be stronger than a will and safer than a deed just between the two of you. Our wives would have to sign, too -- all possible heirs."

Doris whispered to Paul; he nodded his head and squeezed her arm. "That's all well and good. But can we have something in there that will protect Mom and Dad too -- give them assurance that they will always have a home and income and so on?"

"That can be included, too, and should be, of course." Will nodded.

There was another "land meeting" in the office of the local Home Valley real estate and insurance office. A stranger stopped to see the real estate dealer Mr. Snubbers listened at first to the visitor without a change of expression on his face. The man was saying, "Now, you probably want to know what's in it for you. Well, Metropolitan Farms, Inc., always looks out for its friends. If you can arrange the purchase of those eight farms for us on the west side of the road, from the Home Valley church to the creek, we'll give you a \$2000 bonus in addition to the usual commission -- provided you do it on the quiet, so prices don't rise on us. Metropolitan Farms isn't operating for charity, you know." The business man beamed in self assurance, "We'll make that bonus \$3500 and call it a deal."

"We'll call it a dirty deal," Snubbers was red. "Why look what would happen there in Home Valley with eight farmers moving out and your group of hired laborers and farm managers moving in. You'd ruin the school, you'd ruin the church, your seasonal gangs of pickers would bring in disease and boost the town relief rolls, it'd be bad for morals and the only people to profit would be the stockholders in New York Philadelphia. Home Valley is the best section in this country right now -- high ownership, good farms, good folks. You'd tear down the fences, bring in machines and turn it into a bunch of factories in the field. I won't touch it with a ten-foot pole. buy some other Judas."

The man shrugged, picked up his hat and turned to the door, "You'll be so

"I'll be sorry with a clear conscience, then," Snubbers called after him. "That's more than you'll have."

Mr. Snubbers knew where he was going. The other real estate men in town would not be allergic to the easy money. He drummed his fingers on the desk. Then he decided how he could fight Metropolitan Farms; he called Pastor Jim.

The next meeting of the land committee was punctuated with conviction. "We won't sell!"

"We ought to do what is best for Home Valley," said Homestead, "for the wives and children and the land of all of us, not consider only our own personal gain or loss. Let's stick together on this. Let's agree with each other that we won't sell."

Pastor Jim looked at their earnest faces. "Are we ready to take a little
bigger step than that? Can we make a sort of agreement, or compact, that all the families
of the church could sign, binding themselves not to sell or rent without first giving
the Land Committee a year's time, say, in which to find a suitable buyer or tenant?"

Homestead beamed, "Pastor, you draw one up and we'll see. Sam and Bill and I could take it around."

Several weeks later Pastor Jim stood in the pulpit of the Home Valley church and made this announcement: "The signatures on this compact represent every family in the church and a few that are not members but have thought enough of the future of Home Valley to ask to sign also. What it means, only God in His grace and wisdom will reveal as the years unfold. It is sufficient cause for us to rejoice that we have a mutual pledge of trust in each other, belief in the value of keeping Home Valley a valley of godly homes and faith in the Lord God to whom alone belongs the earth and its fullness. May He in His mercy look upon our stewardship of the land He has given to us to use for the little span of our lives, and find it worth His blessing."

"The hymn is number 82, 'God of Grace and God of Glory, On Thy People Pour Thy Power.'"